



FDA statement on use of wood in cheese-aging process

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MADISON – The FDA issued a statement in response to a letter from DATCP Secretary Ben Brancel regarding the long standing practice of cheese makers using wooden boards to age their product. Working with Governor Scott Walker’s office, the Secretary urged the FDA to review what appeared to be a change in food safety policy.

Public Statement from the FDA:

“The FDA does not have a new policy banning the use of wooden shelves in cheese-making, nor is there any FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) requirement in effect that addresses this issue. Moreover, the FDA has not taken any enforcement action based solely on the use of wooden shelves.

In the interest of public health, the FDA’s current regulations state that utensils and other surfaces that contact food must be “adequately cleanable” and properly maintained. Historically, the FDA has expressed concern about whether wood meets this requirement and has noted these concerns in inspectional findings. FDA is always open to evidence that shows that wood can be safely used for specific purposes, such as aging cheese.

The FDA will engage with the artisanal cheese-making community to determine whether certain types of cheeses can safely be made by aging them on wooden shelving.”

The FDA also heard from others including Vermont Secretary of Agriculture, Chuck Ross. “I am pleased to see the FDA responding quickly to this important matter,” said DATCP Secretary Ben Brancel. “DATCP will continue to work with the FDA as it engages the cheese making community on this issue.”

A scientific review conducted by Dr. Bill Wendorff of the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research and French researcher Bénédicte Coudé concluded that wooden boards could be safely used for cheese aging, provided thorough cleaning and heating procedures were followed. Those procedures are in place in Wisconsin.

The Food Safety division at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) has an existing policy requiring department approval of industry procedures for maintaining cheese-aging boards in a sanitary condition. These procedures are there to ensure that “*utensils and other surfaces that contact food must be “adequately cleanable” and properly maintained*” as mentioned in the FDA statement. This includes wooden shelving used in an aging process that gives Wisconsin cheeses their distinct flavor and appeal.

This process is not only part of our state’s heritage, but contributes to the growing worldwide demand for quality Wisconsin cheeses, produced by highly skilled cheese makers. Supplying this demand has a multi-million dollar impact on our dairy economy.

While food safety regulation is important to preserving that quality and reputation, we would urge the FDA not to take unnecessary steps that could severely impact the competitiveness of Wisconsin cheese makers in the international market place.